

SCHOOL DISTRICT SPENDING OF AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN FUNDING

A SNAPSHOT

September 2021



INTRODUCTION

AASA, The School Superintendents Association, surveyed hundreds of district leaders across the U.S. in July about their plans to utilize American Rescue Plan (ARP) and other federal COVID-19 relief funding to address the pandemic-related student learning recovery.

In 2020 and 2021, Congress directed close to \$200 billion to state and local education agencies to help reopen schools and aid school districts in addressing the impact the pandemic had on students through improvements to their academic, social-emotional, and mental and physical health needs.

AASA believes this funding will have a lasting impact in enabling students to not only recover from lost in-person instruction, but in assisting district leaders in thoughtfully investing federal funds in ways that address longstanding disparities in accessing educational opportunities for students that were only exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To date, 46 states have submitted their plans to the U.S. Department of Education on how they plan to utilize ARP funding and have set the stage for districts to receive their funding allocations and submit their local plans describing how they will utilize this funding.

The purpose of this survey was to ascertain:

- District leaders' immediate priorities in expending federal pandemic relief.
- Systemic improvements districts plan to make throughout the next 3 years to improve education outcomes and close equity gaps with this funding.
- The use of federal funding for school facilities' upgrades/projects.



FINDINGS



75%

Three-quarters (75%) of respondents indicated they were using ARP funding for summer learning and enrichment offerings.



66%

Two-thirds (66%) of respondents plan to use ARP funding to add specialized instructional support staff and other specialists (e.g., counselor/social worker/reading specialists) to support specific student needs.

62%



Nearly two-thirds (62%) are using ARP funds to purchase technology/devices and/or provide students with internet connectivity during the school year.

» Urban, suburban and rural districts all responded at nearly identical rates that they would be using ARP funding to add specialist staff.

ARP dollars were allocated to districts based on the share of Title I funding they received. The federal government’s continued reliance on Title I—a flawed formula that places considerable weight on the number of students in poverty rather than the percentage of students in poverty—leads to larger, more urban districts receiving substantially more funding per pupil than smaller, more rural, or poorer districts.

Because urban districts benefit considerably from the distribution of funding through the Title I formula and subsequently have considerably more buying power than less populous districts, the AASA survey finds that urban districts were much more likely to report investing their ARP funding into expanding or starting multiple new programs and systems than rural districts.



61%

More than half (61%) said they were going to invest in professional development for their educators.

» Suburban districts were the least likely to use ARP funding to invest in teacher planning/professional development and use funding for education technology purchases compared to rural and urban districts.



52%

Slightly more than half (52%) of respondents said they would use ARP funding to implement or advance social-emotional learning practices and systems in their districts and/or on trauma-informed training for their educators.

FINDINGS



44%

Nearly half (44%) said they planned to provide high-intensity tutoring with the funding.

42%

More than 4 out of 10 (42%) said they would add learning time by compensating staff through stipends for working longer days and years.



Urban districts were far more likely than rural districts to indicate they planned to use ARP funding to add learning time or extended day/year programming, expand summer learning opportunities, expand early childhood programs, invest in SEL practices and trauma-informed practices, and improve community engagement.

In contrast, rural districts were much more likely than urban and suburban districts to report that they were purchasing technology/devices and/or providing students with internet connectivity with ARP funding and responded at considerably lower rates that they planned to expand programming or learning time for students with ARP funding.

Urban, suburban and rural districts all responded at nearly identical rates that they would be using ARP funding to add specialist staff, such as mental health counselors, demonstrating a profound need for this staff across district sizes and locales.

Suburban districts were the least likely to use ARP funding to invest in teacher planning/professional development and use funding for education technology purchases compared to rural and urban districts.

Suburban districts were also more likely than urban and rural districts to indicate they would use ARP funding to reduce class sizes.

3-YEAR PLANS

The AASA survey also sought information on what systemic improvements superintendents planned to invest in throughout the next 3 years to improve educational outcomes and close equity gaps for students using ARP funding.

By far, the most popular response to this question was to expand whole child supports, which include social, emotional, mental and physical health and development programming for students.



FINDINGS



83%

More than three-quarters (83%) of respondents expressed their desire to use this investment to meet the needs of their students physical, social-emotional and behavioral development.

FINDINGS



58%

More than half (58%) of respondents indicated their district would be able to improve educational outcomes by investing in re-engaging high school students who have fallen off-track to graduate and who need additional support to navigate the transition to college and career.

» Urban districts were more likely than other districts to express a goal of improving bilingual services, building diverse teacher pathways and expanding early childhood.

Urban districts expressed a particularly deep interest in identifying and proactively re-engaging students who were offline, hard to find or have left school altogether because of school closures.

57%

More than half (57%) said they would be able to renovate and build school facilities.



32% 

Just about one third (32%) said they would seek to expand early childhood learning opportunities using ARP funding.

» Suburban districts were far more likely to indicate they planned to use ARP funding to enhance special education services than rural districts.

» Suburban districts were less likely than urban and rural districts to indicate they would be using ARP funding to renovate and build school facilities throughout the next 3 years.



FACILITIES RENOVATION, INDOOR AIR QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

Given that funding for school infrastructure may be significantly lower than initial administration and Congressional proposals earlier this year, AASA asked survey respondents what percentage of ARP funding they were planning to spend on facilities renovation, indoor air quality improvements and new construction.



45% of districts indicated they would spend between 1-10% of ARP funding on school facilities improvements.



13% of districts indicated they would spend between 11-15% of ARP funding on school facilities improvements.



17% of districts indicated they would spend between 16-25% of ARP funding on school facilities improvements.



16% of districts indicated they would spend between 26-50% of ARP funding on school facilities improvements.

One quarter of respondents indicated that the 2024 deadline to spend funding was an obstacle in using ARP funding for infrastructure updates and construction. While their explanations varied slightly, the most common issue identified was finding contractors willing and able to take on these projects given continued supply chain disruptions that make competition for skilled labor and materials very challenging. In addition, a number of respondents stated they were discouraged to invest in facilities' updates given how inflated prices are because of demand.



» Nearly half of urban districts and two-thirds of suburban districts indicated they would spend less than 10% of ARP funding on construction or other infrastructure improvements.

Rural districts were much more likely than suburban and urban districts to spend more than 25% of their ARP funding on facility enhancements.

As a point of context, rural districts' ARP allocations were much smaller than urban districts, which could be a reason why they are spending a larger percentage of these funds on construction and facility improvements.

CONCLUSION

Given the concern by some advocates and staff on Capitol Hill that district leaders are either taking too long to spend or are unsure of how to spend federal COVID-19 relief funding to address specific pandemic-related educational issues, we hope this survey of AASA members is reassuring and sheds light on the trends in allocating federal resources quickly to address both short-term and long-term issues for students and districts.

While this survey data is a snapshot of the earliest days of ESSER spending, AASA intends to monitor the continued investment and impact of these dollars on students, particularly vulnerable students, in future surveys of our membership.

OTHER SURVEY FINDINGS

- One-fifth of respondents planned to use ARP funding to improve parent and community engagement and one-fifth of respondents said they would use ARP to improve data systems and data literacy among educators.
- Roughly 17% of superintendents said they planned to use ARP funds immediately to expand early childhood programming.
- Nearly one-quarter of respondents indicated they would invest ARP funding throughout the next 3 years to provide bilingual opportunities and enhanced services for English language learners.
- Nearly one-quarter of respondents said they would take advantage of the three-year spending timeframe to build a diverse teacher preparation pathway to address local shortages.